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ABSTRACT

Paulo Freire's framework pursues social justice, or liberation. Students and teachers critically think about the conditions of their realities, for the purpose of constructing and attempting solutions, referred to as "action" by Freire. Reflection-action is possible through collaboration, or dialogue--interdependent and concurrent processes to enact praxis. The key in praxis is the ongoing partnership between action, reflection, and dialogue. It is through this partnership that Freire advocates problem-posing education, as a construction of knowledge "through invention and re-invention," in relationship with people and the world, enacting a particular kind of inquiry. Contrasting this approach is banking education, which assumes that knowledge is a possession that teachers need to give to students. This paper examines teacher research calling upon the name of Freirean or critical pedagogy, related to working class language minorities. Throughout the paper, Freire's works are referred to collectively, drawing upon four particular texts listed in the works cited. Noting that much of the rhetoric around reflection exhibits an unarticulated assumed meaning (contrasting with Freire's clear position), the paper explains that the scholarship examined focused excessively on student reflection as opposed to Freire's emphasis on reflection by students and teachers. It describes three "misappropriations" of reflection. The paper concludes by briefly touching on some promising approaches: taking steps to connect students with the community; following students' initiative on issues of their concern; and harnessing "reflective writing" toward a publication that resembles the product of action envisioned by Freire. Lists 17 works cited. (NKA)

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"Blah" or Praxis? Reflection in Freirean Pedagogy.

by Melissa Hasbrook

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While preparing for this discussion, some important points about reflection emerged, so there are slight changes from the session description. As I examine teacher research calling upon the name of Freirean or critical pedagogy, related to working class language minorities, let me be clear that I'm not referring to all teachers. And I'm particularly concerned with how we use, what we mean by, and who engages in reflection. Throughout this discussion, I refer to Freire's works collectively, drawing upon four particular texts listed in the works cited.

To offer a brief summary, Freire's framework pursues social justice, or liberation. Students and teachers critically think about the conditions of their realities, for the purpose of constructing and attempting solutions, referred to as "action" by Freire. Reflection-action is possible through collaboration, or dialogue-- interdependent and concurrent processes to enact praxis. The key in praxis is the on-going partnership between action, reflection, and dialogue.

It's through this partnership that Freire advocates problem-posing education, as a construction of knowledge "through invention and re-invention" (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 58), in relationship with people and the world, enacting a particular kind of inquiry (Chapter 2). Contrasting this approach is banking education, which assumes that knowledge is a possession that teachers need to give to students. In North America, educational institutions and the dominant culture position working-class students--who include many immigrants--as primarily needing basics, or as "deficients" needing help.

In contrast, some teachers attempt problem posing with such students in a range of language arts contexts. While striving to connect students' lives within the classroom, such educators often claim allegiance to critical pedagogy. *Freire's mantra "read the world, not the word" is proclaimed, yet teachers vary in the nature of their concern regarding students' relationships to the dominant culture: with some dismissing the relationship as low priority with "needy" students, and others seeing "ethnic" students needing to acculturate, and lastly those who work alongside (in partnership) students toward liberatory ends.*

In my work with working-class immigrants and refugees, I've encountered this range of colleagues' positions but especially an attitude of dismissal or deficiency. As an ESL coordinator for a nonprofit literacy organization, my director--a professor at a university--pontificated on ways that Hmong immigrants who we served should change their cultural practices and that we should take steps to encourage such change, unveiling the hegemonic agenda often cloaked in literacy programs. While working at a community college as a teacher, Writing Center consultant, and tutor, I've met with such students who navigate institutional constraints. Their challenges with language extend beyond English to painful negotiations with teachers who demonstrate a generosity that Freire calls "false", because of its oppressiveness.

REFLECTION

With these experiences in mind, I've found it interesting that teachers associating their selves with critical or Freirean pedagogy exhibit a peculiar interest in reflection. Hence my query and title "'Blah' or Praxis," with Freire's words in mind:

> When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into *verbalism*, into an alienated and alienating "blah" . . .
>
> On the other hand, if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into *activism*. The latter—action for action's sake—negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible . . . (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 75)

In preparing for this talk, I realized that much of the rhetoric around reflection exhibits an unarticulated assumed meaning, which contrasts Freire's clear position. While many of these instances don't offer a careful account of what's meant by "reflection," they typically illustrate reflection as thinking in general, as opportunities to give an opinion, or as a practice of examining one's development of writing. Some teachers present their work in an apolitical manner, while others cloak their pedagogy in liberatory talk, or "blah."

A case in point is Diana Diaz's dissertation, which focuses on a process approach for teaching writing to adult language learners. In an ESL preparatory course for the writing exam at Hostos Community College of CUNY (City University of New York) (6), Diaz taught working-class Latinos (39). She contrasts the students' initial lacking confidence of self-expression in English with their mastery by the course's conclusion (81), interpreting this outcome as "a liberating effect" (77). Diaz names her goal as helping students to develop a "sense of audience" (119) with "the dominant culture" through a reflective process. Yet she singles out Jesus as a student who resisted relating to that audience (120). Concluding her comments on Jesus, she mentioned her lack of surprise that he didn't pass the entrance exam. In Freire's framework, Diaz's account of Jesus unveils a student rejecting a teacher's oppression. Diaz fulfills Freire's warning about "false generosity"--when one perceives her knowledge as a gift, consequently dehumanizing students (Pedagogy of the Oppressed).

Diaz's use of reflection to foster students' desire to acculturate (122) offers a clear illustration in contrast with critical or Freirean pedagogy. Freire explains reflection to be a kind of thinking that shapes one's view of self in relationship with the world that engages all parties equitably. As a kind of awareness, reflection isn't a consumption of ideas but rather a product of action (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 108). Freire interchangeably and continuously uses phrases like "object of cognition", "object of action", and "action of reflection" (Chapter 3), which springs from his view on the interdependence of reflection and action. Related to inquiries of "reflexivity," Freire's views resemble what Cushman and Monberg (1998) name "social-reflexivity"--a process that moves one toward re-viewing one's self and the world, and also equitably re-positioning one's relationship with others.

The scholarship that I examined focusing excessively on student reflection, which contrasts Freire's emphasis on reflection by students and teachers. Many educators rarely address how reflection impacts their decision-making, instead debating how to engage students in reflection, such as strategies like journaling. In contrast, Freire advocates that teacher reflection should incorporate student reflection, shaping curriculum and class activities (Pedagogy of the Oppresed Chapter 2). For the purposes of this discussion, I mentioned this as an important trend, and suggest other references for anyone interested,

including Freire and Shor's fourth chapter in A Pedagogy for Liberation, and Shor's When Students Have Power.

MISAPPROPRIATIONS

These trends of what's meant by reflection and who reflects make possible discussing particular misappropriations that emerge from teacher research. I attempt to tease out different implications or assumptions, although there's some overlap since each arises from discussions around reflection.

Reflection as sufficient--or "it's 'enough' to reflect."

Reflection as action--or "reflection and action are synonymous"

And reflection as the only realistic possibility--or "action isn't realistic."

Misappropriation 1--Reflection as sufficient:

Reflection as sufficient appears often when teachers frame reflection as an "end-all" pursuit in the classroom. In part, teachers' concerns with students navigating educational institutions shape this perspective. Srole likens this navigation experience of working-class language minorities to a maze of middle-class academic culture (109). Appealing to humanitarianism, such educators examine assignment structures--such as multiple choice vs. essay tests, and the academy as a discourse community, into which Eskey claims that "students must be *acculturated*" (140). Diaz's use of reflection demonstrates this instance of misappropriation, her main concern being the students' reflective process in writing. Perhaps teachers are lured into this position by assuming that knowledge is an entity that needs to be given to students, an assumption that demonstrates banking education according to Freire.

Misappropriation 2--Reflection as action:

A second pattern of misappropriation is reflection as action. Teachers demonstrate a concern for students to confront historically oppressive conditions. Hesford examines such possibilities through autobiographical writing (Framing Identities). Teachers emphasize the possibility that reflection *may* result in action by creating opportunities for students to address and re-dress these conditions. William

Weiss implemented such an approach in a literature course at Patten College in East Oakland California with mostly minority students (29). Valuing canon formation as a significant community task (31, 35), he engaged students in creating a class canon through a discovery process that develops "authentic critical thinking."

Weiss writes that the students "acquired the power and the responsibility to articulate their own destiny" through decisions, like developing research questions for a particular text and keeping track of sources found for classmates' reference toward papers (34). While Weiss endeavors to enact "genuinely dialectical democracy" (36), there's no mention of how this decision-making draws upon the students' lives, apart from particular decisions made about how to read an assigned text. In light of Freire's framework, such cases conflate reflection as action and obscure liberatory ends, as teachers don't distinguish between action and reflection at all.

Misappropriation 3--Reflection as the only realistic possibility

The last misappropriation I want to examine is that reflection is the only realistic possibility in the classroom. Claiming to implement problem posing in their courses, these teachers cringe from resistance to a pedagogy that pursues liberatory action. Such resistance arises from institutions, for example, which Villanueva experienced in his initial attempts at applying a pedagogy inspired by Freire. David Spener claims that action in a Freirean sense basically isn't realistic in US contexts with working-class language minorities. After working with Central-American refugees in a Washington, D.C., community program (88), Spener claims that students wouldn't be responsive to such a reflection-action pedagogy, because students invited teachers into their homes for "English only"—not for addressing social problems. Dismissing liberatory action in ESL contexts, Spener emphasizes that students struggling to get "their bearings" (97) aren't in a position to worry about liberatory ends. Spener attempts to create a bleak portrait of other teachers who've attempted to implement liberatory action, but Spener's language demonstrates that he didn't attempt this approach, because of an anticipation that it wouldn't work. Also, upon examining the teacher research that he cites, I found him to misrepresent the findings. At the end of this discussion, I'll talk about Hemmendinger, who is one of these authors.

Much like Diaz, Spener positions himself as knowing-what's-best for the students, reflecting the false generosity against which Freire cautions well-meaning teachers. Unlike Weiss and Diaz, Spener explicitly addresses a distinction between reflection and action, and attempts to persuade his audience that it's "okay" to focus on basics for students who struggle economically and socially while negotiating multiple challenges as laborers, immigrants, and people of color. If Spener's assumption about possible student resistance were to surface in the case that he attempted liberatory ends, their concern could be cautionary againts falsely-generous agents of acculturation, as Diaz's student Jesus, rather than a disinterest to dialogue about their collective problems.

Conclusion on misappropriations:

Ellsworth's critique of popularized critical pedagogy, in which the misuse of "critical" exposes maligned attempts at so-called liberating change (306), which is liberal rather than liberatory. Holding to Freire's interdependent reflection-action doesn't privilege action before or "above" reflection, but rather engages a partnership toward praxis. Otherwise, teachers emphasize literacy as merely a psychological process, says Wallace, rather than "as a social activity in the real world" (xi). Disingenuous attempts at Freirean or critical pedagogy masquerade as problem-posing yet enact banking education because of their failure to engage action toward liberation.

POSSIBILITIES OF AN INTERDEPENDENT REFLECTION-ACTION

While we should carefully weigh research that claims critical or liberatory pedagogy, and scrutinize our uses and assumptions about what we name "reflection," we can take heart that there *is* research available by teachers who enact liberatory reflection-action. So, in conclusion, I want to briefly touch on some promising approaches each with a particular example.

First: Taking steps to connect students with the community. Brian Morgan, in courses with working-class Chinese immigrants arranged visits to an elementary school to discuss their homeland (11) He also used the media's depiction of current events through examining images and captions for students to address happenings in their communities.

Also: Following students' initiative on issues of their concern. While teaching working-class Hmong immigrants in Canada, Hemmendinger followed her students lead about a labor issue. They discussed the problem about a local employer who cheated the students out of wages (35) and possible solutions to the problem. Consequently, the students talked with their community, deciding to take the employer to court, after which they received compensation (36).

Last: Harnessing "reflective writing" toward a publication that resembles the product of action envisioned by Freire. Peyton examines a range of instances, including ESL courses that have published class magazines for other ESL students[1] and a book series titled Tales from Boston Neighborhoods, authored by immigrants and published by the Boston Public Library (67). Minority Rights Group International also published writings from refugees in the Netherlands and England both to address a wide audience about refugee experiences as well as to serve as materials for ESL courses (3).

Looking toward possibility, I offer Freire's hope for a liberatory pedagogy that engages reflection and action toward praxis:

> Hope is something shared between teachers and students. The hope that we can learn together, teach together, be curiously impatient together, produce something together, and resist together the obstacles that present the flowering of our joy. In truth, from the point of view of the human condition, hope is an essential component and not an intruder. It would be a serious contradiction of what we are if, aware of our unfinishedness, we were not disposed to participate in a constant movement of search, which in its very nature is an expression of hope. Hope is a natural, possible, and necessary impetus in the context of our unfinishedness. (Pedagogy of Freedom 69)

[1] Those are Nishizaki 1984 and Russel 1985.

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